GUENHWYVAR
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Josidiah Starym skipped wistfully down the streets of Cormanthor, the usually stern and somber elf a bit giddy this day, both for the beautiful weather and the recent developments in his most precious and enchanted city. Josidiah was a bladesinger, a joining of sword and magic, protector of the elvish ways and the elvish folk. And in Cormanthor, in this year 253, many elves were in need of protecting. Goblinkin were abundant, and even worse, the emotional turmoil within the city, the strife among the noble families -- the Starym included -- threatened to tear apart all that Coronal Eltargrim had put together, all that the elves had built in Cormanthor, greatest city in all the world.

Those were not troubles for this day, though, not in the spring sunshine, with a light north breeze blowing. Even Josidiah's kin were in good spirits this day; Taleisin, his uncle, had promised the bladesinger that he would venture to Eltargrim's court to see if some of their disputes might perhaps be worked out.

Josidiah prayed that the elven court would come back together, for he, perhaps above all others in the city, had the most to lose. He was a bladesinger, the epitome of what it meant to be elven, and yet, in this curious age, those definitions seemed not so clear. This was an age of change, of great magics, of monumental decisions. This was an age when the humans, the gnomes, the halflings, even the bearded dwarves, ventured down the winding ways of Cormanthor,

past the needle-pointed spires of the free-flowing elvish structures. For all of Josidiah's previous one hundred and fifty years, the precepts of elvenkind seemed fairly defined and rigid; but now, because of their Coronal, wise and gentle Eltargrim, there was much dispute about what it meant to be elvish, and, more importantly, what relationships elves should foster with the other goodly races.

"Merry morn, Josidiah," came the call of an elven female, the young and beautiful maiden niece of Eltargrim himself. She stood on a balcony overlooking a high garden whose buds were not yet in bloom, with the avenue beyond that. Josidiah stopped in midstride, leapt high into the air in a complete spin, and landed perfectly on bended knee, his long golden hair whipping across his face and then flying out wide again so that his eyes, the brightest of blue, flashed. "And the merriest of morns to you, good Felicity," the bladesinger responded. "Would that I held at my sides flowers befitting your beauty instead of these blades made for war."

"Blades as beautiful as any flower ever I have seen," Felicity replied teasingly, "especially when wielded by Josidiah Starym at dawn's break, on the flat rock atop Berenguil's Peak."

The bladesinger felt the hot blood rushing to his face. He had suspected that someone had been spying on him at his morning rituals -- a dance with his magnificent swords, performed nude -- and now he had his confirmation. "Perhaps

Felicity should join me on the morrow's dawn," he replied, catching his breath and his dignity, "that I might properly reward her for her spying."

The young female laughed heartily and spun back into her house, and Josidiah shook his head and skipped along. He entertained thoughts of how he might properly "reward" the mischievous female, though he feared that, given Felicity's beauty and station, any such attempts might lead to something much more, something Josidiah could not become involved in -- not now, not after Eltargrim's proclamation and the drastic changes.

The bladesinger shook away all such notions; it was too fine a day for any dark musing, and other thoughts of Felicity were too distracting for the meeting at hand. Josidiah went out of Cormanthor's west gate, the guards posted there offering no more than a respectful bow as he passed, and into the open air. Truly Josidiah loved this city, but he loved the land outside of it even more. Out here he was truly free of all the worries and all the petty squabbles, and out here there was ever a sense of danger -- might a goblin be watching him even now, its crude spear ready to take him down? -- that kept the formidable elf on his highest guard.

Out here, too, was a friend, a human friend, a rangerturned-wizard by the name of Anders Beltgarden, whom Josidiah had known for the better part of four decades. Anders did not venture into Cormanthor, even given Eltargrim's proclamation to open the gates to nonelves. He lived far from the normal, oft-traveled paths, in a squat tower of excellent construction, guarded by magical wards and deceptions of his own making. Even the forest about his home was full of misdirections, spells of illusion and confusion. So secretive was Beltgarden Home that few elves of nearby Cormanthor even knew of it, and even fewer had ever seen it.

And of those, none save Josidiah could find his way back to it without Anders's help.

And Josidiah held no illusions about it -- if Anders wanted to hide the paths to the tower even from him, the cagey old wizard would have little trouble doing so.

This wonderful day, however, it seemed to Josidiah that the winding paths to Beltgarden Home were easier to follow than usual, and when he arrived at the structure, he found the door unlocked.

"Anders," he called, peering into the darkened hallway beyond the portal, which always smelled as if a dozen candles had just been extinguished within it. "Old fool, are you about?"

A feral growl put the bladesinger on his guard; his swords were in his hands in a movement too swift for an observer to follow.

"Anders?" he called again, quietly, as he picked his way along the corridor, his feet moving in perfect balance, soft boots gently touching the stone, quiet as a hunting cat.

The growl came again, and that is exactly when Josidiah

knew what he was up against: a hunting cat. A big one, the bladesinger recognized, for the deep growl resonated along the stone of the hallway.
He passed by the first doors, opposite each other in the hall, and then passed the second on his left.
The third -- he knew -- the sound came from within the third. That knowledge gave the bladesinger some hope that this situation was under control, for that particular door led to Anders's alchemy shop, a place well guarded by the old wizard.

Josidiah cursed himself for not being better prepared magically. He had studied few spells that day, thinking it too fine and not wanting to waste a moment of it with his face buried in spellbooks.
If only he had some spell that might get him into the room more quickly, through a magical gate, or even a spell that would send his probing vision through the stone wall, into the room before him.
He had his swords, at least, and with them, Josidiah Starym was far from helpless. He put his back against the wall near to the door and took a deep steadying breath.
Then, without delay -- old Anders might be in serious trouble -- the bladesinger spun about and crashed into the room.
He felt the arcs of electricity surging into him as he crossed the warded portal, and then he was flying, hurled through the air, to land crashing at the base of a huge oaken table. Anders Beltgarden stood calmly at the side of the table, working with something atop it, hardly bothering to look down at the stunned bladesinger.
"You might have knocked," the old mage said dryly.
Josidiah pulled himself up unceremoniously from the floor, his muscles not quite working correctly just yet. Convinced that there was no danger near, Josidiah let his gaze linger on the human, as he often did. The bladesinger hadn't seen many humans in his life -- humans were a recent addition on the north side of the Sea of Fallen Stars, and were not present in great numbers in or about Cormanthor.
This one was the most curious human of all, with his leathery, wrinkled face and his wild gray beard. One of Anders's eyes had been ruined in a fight, and it appeared quite

dead now, a gray film over the lustrous green it had once held. Yes, Josidiah could stare at old Anders for hours on end, seeing the tales of a lifetime in his scars and wrinkles.
Most of the elves, Josidiah's own kinfolk included, would have thought the old man an ugly thing; elves did not wrinkle and weather so, but aged beautifully, appearing at the end of several centuries as they had when they had seen but twenty or fifty winters.
Josidiah did not think Anders an ugly sight, not at all. Even those few crooked teeth remaining in the man's mouth complemented this creature he had become, this aged and wise creature, this sculptured monument to years under the sun and in the face of storms, to seasons battling goblinkin

and giantkind. Truly it seemed ridiculous to Josidiah that he was twice this man's age; he wished he might carry a few wrinkles as testament to his experiences.
"You had to know it would be warded," Anders laughed. "Of course you did! Ha ha, just putting on a show, then. Giving an old man one good laugh before he dies!"
"You will outlive me, I fear, old man," said the bladesinger. "Indeed, that is a distinct possibility if you keep crossing my doors unannounced."
"I feared for you," Josidiah explained, looking around the huge room -- too huge, it seemed, to fit inside the tower, even if it had consumed an entire level. The bladesinger suspected some extradimensional magic to be at work here, but he had never been able to detect it, and the frustrating Anders certainly wasn't letting on.

As large as it was, Anders's alchemy shop was still a cluttered place, with boxes piled high and tables and cabinets strewn about in a hodgepodge.
"I heard a growl," the elf continued. "A hunting cat."
Without looking up from some vials he was handling, Anders nodded his head in the direction of a large, blanketcovered container. "See that you do not get too close," the old mage said with a wicked cackle. "Old Whiskers will grab you by the arm and tug you in, don't you doubt!
"And then you'll need more than your shiny swords," Anders cackled on.
Josidiah wasn't even listening, pacing quietly toward the blanket, moving silently so as not to disturb the cat within. He grabbed the edge of the blanket and, moving safely back, tugged it away. And then the bladesinger's jaw surely drooped.
It was a cat, as he had suspected, a great black panther, twice -- no thrice -- the size of the largest cat Josidiah had ever seen or heard of. And the cat was female, and females were usually much smaller than males. She paced the cage slowly, methodically, as if searching for some weakness, some escape, her rippling muscles guiding her along with unmatched grace.
"How did you come by such a magnificent beast?" the bladesinger asked. His voice apparently startled the panther, stopping her in her tracks. She stared at Josidiah with an intensity that stole any further words right from the bladesinger's mouth.
"Oh, I have my ways, elf," the old mage said. "I've been looking for just the right cat for a long, long time, searching

all the known world -- and bits of it that are not yet known to any but me!"
"But why?" Josidiah asked, his voice no more than a whisper. His question was aimed as much at the magnificent panther as at the old mage, and truly, the bladesinger could think of no reason to justify putting such a creature into a cage.
"You remember my tale of the box canyon," Anders replied,

"of how my mentor and I flew owl-back out of the clutches of a thousand goblins?"
Josidiah nodded and smiled, remembering well that amusing story. A moment later, though, when the implications of Anders's words hit him fully, the elf turned back to the mage, a scowl clouding his fair face. "The figurine," Josidiah muttered, for the owl had been but a statuette, enchanted to bring forth a great bird in times of its master's need. There were many such objects in the world, many in Cormanthor, and Josidiah was not unacquainted with the methods of constructing them (though his own magics were not strong enough along the lines of enchanting). He looked back to the great panther, saw a distinct sadness there, then turned back sharply to Anders.
"The cat must be killed at the moment of preparation," the bladesinger protested. "Thus her life energies will be drawn into the statuette you will have created."
"Working on that even now," Anders said lightly. "I have hired a most excellent dwarven craftsman to fashion a panther statuette. The finest craftsman...er, craftsdwarf, in all the area. Fear not, the statuette will do the cat justice."

"Justice?" the bladesinger echoed skeptically, looking once more into the intense, intelligent yellow-green eyes of the huge panther. "You will kill the cat?"
"I offer the cat immortality," Anders said indignantly.
"You offer death to her will, and slavery to her body," snapped Josidiah, more angry than he had ever been with old Anders. The bladesinger had seen figurines and thought them marvelous artifacts, despite the sacrifice of the animal in question. Even Josidiah killed deer and wild pig for his table, after all. So why should a wizard not create some useful item from an animal?
But this time it was different, Josidiah sensed in his heart. This animal, this great and free cat, must not be so enslaved.
"You will make the panther..." Josidiah began.
"Whiskers," explained Anders.
"The panther..." the bladesinger reiterated forcefully, unable to come to terms with such a foolish name being tagged on this animal. "You will make the panther a tool, an animation that will function to the will of her master."
"What would one expect?" the old mage argued. "What else would one want?"
Josidiah shrugged and sighed helplessly. "Independence," he muttered.
"Then what would be the point of my troubles?"
Josidiah's expression clearly showed his thinking. An independent magical companion might not be of much use to an adventurer in a dangerous predicament, but it would surely be preferable from the sacrificed animal's point of view.

"You chose wrong, bladesinger," Anders teased. "You should have studied as a ranger. Surely your sympathies lie

in that direction!"
"A ranger," the bladesinger asked, "as Anders Beltgarden once was?"
The old mage blew a long and helpless sigh.
"Have you so given up the precepts of your former trade in exchange for the often ill-chosen allure of magical mysteries?"
"Oh, and a fine ranger you would have been," Anders replied dryly.
Josidiah shrugged. "My chosen profession is not so different," he reasoned.
Anders silently agreed. Indeed, the man did see much of his own youthful and idealistic self in the eyes of Josidiah Starym. That was the curious thing about elves, he noted, that this one, who was twice Anders's present age, reminded him so much of himself when he had but a third his present years.
"When will you begin?" Josidiah asked.
"Begin?" scoffed Anders. "Why, I have been at work over the beast for nearly three weeks, and spent six months before that in preparing the scrolls and powders, the oils, the herbs. Not an easy process, this. And not inexpensive, I might add! Do you know what price a gnome places on the simplest of metal filings, pieces so fine that they might be safely added to the cat's food?"
Josidiah found that he really did not want to continue along this line of discussion. He did not want to know about the poisoning -- and that was indeed what he considered it to

be -- of the magnificent panther. He looked back to the cat, looked deep into her intense eyes, intelligent so far beyond what he would normally expect.
"Fine day outside," the bladesinger muttered, not that he believed that Anders would take a moment away from his work to enjoy the weather. "Even my stubborn Uncle Taleisin, Lord Protector of House Starym, wears a face touched by sunshine."
Anders snorted. "Then he will be smiling this day when he lays low Coronal Eltargrim with a right hook?"
That caught Josidiah off his guard, and he took up Anders's infectious laughter. Indeed was Taleisin a stubborn and crusty elf, and if Josidiah returned to House Starym this day to learn that his uncle had punched the elf Coronal, he would not be surprised.
"It is a momentous decision that Eltargrim has made," Anders said suddenly, seriously. "And a brave one. By including the other goodly races, your Coronal has begun the turning of the great wheel of fate, a spin that will not easily be stopped."
"For good or for ill?"
"That is for a seer to know," Anders replied with a shrug. "But his choice was the right one, I am sure, though not without its risks." The old mage snorted again. "A pity," he said, "even were I a young man, I doubt I would see the outcome of Eltargrim's decision, given the way elves measure the passage of time. How many centuries will pass before the

Starym even decide if they will accept Eltargrim's decree?"
That brought another chuckle from Josidiah, but not a
long-lived one. Anders had spoken of risks, and certainly

there were many. Several prominent families, and not just
the Starym, were outraged by the immigration of peoples
that many haughty elves considered to be of inferior races.
There were even a few mixed marriages, elf and human,
within Cormanthor, but any offspring of such unions were
surely ostracized.
"My people will come to accept Eltargrim's wise council,"
the elf said at length, determinedly.
"I pray you are right," said Anders, "for surely Cormanthor
will face greater perils than the squabbling of stubborn
elves."
Josidiah looked at him curiously.
"Humans and halflings, gnomes and, most importantly,
dwarves, walking among the elves, living in Cormanthor,"
Anders muttered. "Why, I would guess that the goblinkin savor
the thought of such an occurrence, that all their hated
enemies be mixed together into one delicious stew!"
"Together we are many times more powerful," the bladesinger
argued. "Human wizards oft exceed even our own.
Dwarves forge mighty weapons, and gnomes create wondrous
and useful items, and halflings, yes, even halflings, are
cunning allies, and dangerous adversaries."
"I do not disagree with you," Anders said, waving his
tanned and leathery right hand, three-fingered from a goblin
bite, in the air to calm the elf. "And as I have said, Eltargrim
chose correctly. But pray you that the internal disputes are
settled, else the troubles of Cormanthor will come tenfold
from without."
Josidiah calmed and nodded; he really couldn't disagree
with old Anders's reasoning, and had, in fact, harbored those

same fears for many days. With all the goodly races coming
together under one roof, the chaotic goblinkin would have
cause to band together in numbers greater than ever before.
If the varied folk of Cormanthor stood together, gaining
strength in their diversity, those goblinkin, whatever their
numbers, would surely be pushed away. But if the folk of
Cormanthor could not s ee their w a y to such a da y of unity...
Josidiah let the thought hang outside consciousness, put
it aside for another day, a day of rain and fog, perhaps. He
looked back to the panther and sighed even more sadly,
feeling helpless indeed. "Treat the cat well, Anders Beltgarden,"
he said, and he knew that the old man, once a ranger,
would indeed do so.
Josidiah left then, making his way more slowly as he returned
to the elven city. He saw Felicity again on the balcony,
wearing a slight silken shift and a mischievous, inviting
smile, but he passed her by with a wave. The bladesinger
suddenly did not feel so much in the mood for play.
Many times in the next few weeks, Josidiah returned to
Anders's tower and sat quietly before the cage, silently communing

with the panther while the mage went about his work.

"She will be yours when I am done," Anders announced unexpectedly, one day when spring had turned to summer.

Josidiah stared blankly at the old man.

"The cat, I mean," said Anders. "Whiskers will be yours when my work is done."

Josidiah's blue eyes opened wide in horror, though Anders interpreted the look as one of supreme elation.

"She'll do me little use," explained the mage. "I rarely venture out of doors these days, and in truth, have little faith that I will live much more than a few winters longer. Who better to have my most prized creation, I say, than Josidiah Starym, my friend and he who should have been a ranger?"

"I shall not accept," Josidiah said abruptly, sternly.

Anders's eyes widened in surprise.

"I would be forever reminded of what the cat once was," said the elf, "and what she should be. Whenever I called the slave body to my side, whenever this magnificent creature sat on her haunches, awaiting my command to bring life to her limbs, I would feel that I had overstepped my bounds as a mortal, that I had played as a god with one undeserving my foolish intervention."

"It's just an animal!" Anders protested.

Josidiah was glad to see that he had gotten through to the old mage, a man the elf knew to be too sensitive for this present undertaking.

"No," said the elf, turning to stare deeply into the panther's knowing eyes. "Not this one." He fell silent, then, and Anders, with a huff of protest, went back to his work, leaving the elf to sit and stare, to silently share his thoughts with the panther.